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The Handmaid's Tale

Abstract

This article discusses the book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. Recently made into a televised series, the book which was written in 1985, presents a dystopic/futuristic vision of an American future where women have no rights and function in terms of the wider needs of a Puritanical society, Gilead.

This book has received attention recently because of some of the parallels that can be drawn between the evangelical utterings of the current US Republican administration, and the fictional world which Atwood created over 30 years ago.

The book also however, raises a whole raft of questions which lie at the foundations of feminism: the relationships which exist between women, the role of reproduction and power, sexuality, repression and resistance.

This article will look at the key themes in the book alongside recent discussions about the lessons which can be learnt from the text and the warnings we need to heed.

Introduction

I re-read this book recently at the suggestion of a friend who was reading it for a book group. I hadn't read the book for 30 years and whilst I remembered the power of the story I was genuinely shocked at how much of what Atwood wrote felt so relevant today.

“It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control”
(1985, 174).

If this was a new book, one written in the past year or so, I would probably feel the need to give a spoiler alert with the quote above. But this book was published in 1985. That's right, 1985. As such this book needs more of a warning about its powers of prophecy. I found reading the book this time around even more terrifying than when I was a teenager. The terror now felt entirely real, possible, and tangible.

I was literally stunned when I read the quote above. I vaguely remembered how the story developed through a faux coup, but to read Atwood's line about it being blamed on Islamic Terrorists in the current climate was astonishing. It was at that point I turned to look at the date of publication and had to put the book down. So much political rhetoric in recent US and UK elections has been focused on Islamic Extremism, at the expense of any comment on

the extremism of right wing fundamentalist: the murder of MP Jo Cox in Britain, the murder of worshippers at Charleston Church in the US, or the crimes of Breivik in Norway. Reading that line written in 1985 felt like a warning from the past.

Writing about the book in 2012, Atwood said that:

“Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren't there already. Thus China replaced a state bureaucracy with a similar state bureaucracy under a different name, the USSR replaced the dreaded imperial secret police with an even more dreaded secret police, and so forth. The deep foundation of the US – so went my thinking – was not the comparatively recent 18th-century Enlightenment structures of the republic, with their talk of equality and their separation of church and state, but the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England, with its marked bias against women, which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself.” (Guardian, 2012).

More recently she has explained that by ensuring that the story had truth in history, that aspects of the story had happened, albeit in different geographical and historic contexts, the element of prophecy was somewhat inevitable. Since the election of Trump in the US sales of this book have soared. A trend which continues given the very recent TV adaptation.

I hope that those reading the book, whether for the first or multiple time find inspiration in what I believe is one of the most important fictional books of our time.

Social Chaos

Atwood set the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* within an American University town deliberately to illustrate the ease by which the new regime can take over. The story weaves from the current to the past as we slowly learn of the mechanisms by which the change occurred.

“Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you know it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew.”

The main character is initially unable to use her credit cards to buy things, sacked from her job, and subsequently unable to own property.

“Things continued in that state of suspended animation for weeks, although some things did happen. Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful. They said that new elections would be held, but that it would take some time to prepare for them”.

Even here Atwood juxtaposes the personal and political weaving in the relationship between individuals and the state. Following her losing her job and money, we see confusion through the response of Luke – an ally by all accounts but unable to grasp the importance of the encroaching state.

“Hush, he said. He was still kneeling on the floor. You know I’ll always take care of you. I thought, already he’s starting to patronize me. Then I thought, already you’re starting to get paranoid”.

Reading the book this time around I was also struck by the fact that for many women, globally, these restrictions of liberty are already a reality. Atwood has been clear that she chose an American University town to locate her story. As such she could show how ‘normality’ can very quickly change and the rights of women be eroded for the purpose of the state. But the context is still important both in terms of global inequalities amongst women, as well as between women living within the same societies. I will return to this issue shortly.

Central to the book, and the ‘social chaos’ which enables the new order to assert itself, is a decline in fertility, linked within the text to environmental issues. Once again, Atwood is ahead of the game.

The ideological stance of Gilead is that women were disrespected and abused within the previous society and that this was primarily the fault of women for not accepting their place. Within the teachings of the Aunts we see victims blamed for their experiences, Janine is considered to have deserved what happened to her and that it was her fault she was raped. The social chaos, for which some women, and liberals generally, are to blame becomes the ground from which the new regime feeds. Propaganda or “double-think” (Orwell, 1949) rewrites history but also undermines reality. This constant revisiting of what is real or not, continues throughout the book as the protagonist tries to make sense of her past and future.

Sexuality and reproduction

Sexual liberation is presented by the Aunts as the cause of abuse and from within this narrative, the role of the handmaid, as a god given gift, is born. The Handmaid’s are viewed as being given a second chance. To be able to procreate for the regime. As such, their reproductive ability gives them some status. This status however, is both understood and closely controlled. The whole of the female household is geared towards breeding.

In the previous issue of this Journal, Gangoli refers to the handmaids tale in terms of the religious and reproductive narratives within the text.

“Margaret Atwood’s fascinating futurist novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) looks at how this Biblical narrative might be used to control women’s sexuality and reproduction, if women’s

fertility was reduced drastically, either due to their own actions, or wider environmental reasons. In this novel, set in imaginary Gilead, women who have proved their fertility by having children in the past, but who have been adulterous or are divorced, are captured and made handmaids to powerful men and their barren wives, in order that they may produce children through rape. In Atwood's own words: The Handmaid's Tale has often been called a "feminist dystopia", but that term is not strictly accurate. In a feminist dystopia pure and simple, all of the men would have greater rights than all of the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women. But Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded an Econowife. (Atwood, 2012)" (Gangoli, 2017).

Asking the right questions

Reading the book for the second time, I was not prepared for the pure beauty of the written prose. Having watched the adapted film during the intervening years, I had forgotten Atwood's ability to describe the simple and mundane in such an engaging way and was hooked right back into the story from the first page. Even though I knew the overall story, its' strength in content and style is the everyday which Atwood describes so beautifully in both the world we know and the one she creates. The narrow focus of what Atwood describes replicates the narrowness of Offred's world. Blinkered and enclosed.

Like Marge Piercy's *women on the edge of time* (1976), the *Handmaids Tale* is so powerful because we follow a protagonist trying to make sense of the same things that we as readers are trying to understand. We share the same questions. How did it happen, why did it happen, and what would I do?

This book truly is the stuff of nightmares. It deals with issues of morality, equality, and most importantly power through the vehicles of sex, sexuality, childbirth, environment, and freedom.

As such, it shares some themes with other books of its time, as well as echoes of Dworkin's right-wing women which can be glimpsed in the blue uniforms of the wives. The black market women a low tech version of the alternative future seen by Connie in *Women on the edge of time* (Piercy, 1976). The reinforcement of the social structures which the feminism of the time challenged. Kate Millett (1969) for example recognising the power and function of religious iconography, popular culture through magazines, and the rigidity of the family as a replicated form through social relations.

In the *Handmaids Tale* all of these are brought to life with the juxtaposition of the Marthas and the handmaids, the guardians and the wives, the 'eyes' and the angels.

Whose nightmare?

For me, it is perhaps the role of the state through 'the eyes', spies and informers, which brought home how whilst this is a dystopic/futuristic vision for some, for many women this is a reality.

Those states where women's liberties, or human rights, are curtailed and their behaviour monitored is a reality for many women around the world. Morality police who can stop women on the street if they are dressed or behave inappropriately. Countries where women are only allowed out in public if chaperoned. Plus, those states which target everyone by creating a climate of fear where anyone could be an informer.

Others too have questioned the shock of the Handmaid's tale by relating it to current surrogacy practices where poor women act as surrogates for wealthy white women.

"Recently I've started to wonder whether that's strictly true. It can be reassuring to stick to one narrative, one type of baddie – the religious puritan, the pussy-grabbing president, the woman-hating Right. But what if it's more complicated than that? There's something about the current wallowing in Atwood's vision that strikes me as, if not self-indulgent, then at the very least naïve" (Glosswitch, 2017).

As Glosswitch goes on,

"The dystopian predictions of 1985 have already come true. It's just that women like me didn't notice until we started to be called "hosts", too".

This is an important point and one which feminism has always been criticised for failing to address. But it is this tension of power between women which I believe makes the Handmaid's Tale so powerful.

Power within and between

Atwood crafts the stories of Offred and the commander's wife so that we can see the different structural parameters within which they function and survive. Whilst holding power within her household as the commander's wife, Serena Joy too is a pawn in a game which functions to perpetuate the power of the patriarch. Thus we see the everyday used to reflect individual powers against wider state control. The analogy with Andrea Dworkin's *Right Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* was, for me, stark (Dworkin, 1979). Dressed in blue in contrast to the red of the handmaid's the power of the 'wives' is inextricably linked to the function of the handmaids. Represented as failures for being barren, the mere presence of the handmaid is a constant reminder to the wives that whilst they hold power in their households, their position too is uncertain. As a result we see in the book the constant struggle of power between female characters with little power of their own, yet power inferred from their relationship to one another and the head of the household. Alongside the

wives, handmaids, and Marthas there are unwomen. Women with no purpose and unable to breed.

We see Serena Joy's reliance on Offred when she breaks the rules to encourage her to sleep with the driver thus increasing her chances of becoming pregnant. Such a pact places both women in a vulnerable position, albeit, with the wives always holding sway in the hierarchy.

We also see the power which Offred has through the liaisons initiated with the commander.

"Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed that a lot".

Atwood is honest in her writing about the tensions between her female characters and their relative positions to each other and the systems of power. Her characters have depth because they are flawed, jealous, and angry irrespective of the vulnerable positions they are in. As such, the power within and between women is important.

Resistance

One of the key themes of the book, represented by the descriptions of the little that the Handmaid's can see from beneath their wimples, is the power and tension of resistance. Like reality, resistance exists on the margins. Sometimes visible. The protagonist tells us about her life before through the solitude of her room. A room where the light fittings have been removed so she cannot take her own life. As events take place, they trigger memories which Offred recalls. From the moment of waking up in the gymnasium following their failed attempt to escape, Offred constantly balances the need to survive, and possibly find her child, and despair. We see her torn between her solidarity for the women around her and finding ways to stay alive. This is nowhere as stark as her relationship with Janine. Janine who has her eye removed for failing to comply. Janine who they blame for being gang raped. Janine who in a state of despair calls for her own mother. Janine who they protect after she gives birth and the baby is removed from her. Moria's comment that if she isn't there then Offred needs to slap her hard a reminder of the dangers they face and the limits of their power to really work together.

It is this tension between the characters and the strength of the characters themselves which make this book both difficult to read and enthralling. Offred never knows who she can trust. We share her joy and fear when she realises that Ofglen is part of a resistance.

"Us?" I say. There is an *us* then, there's a *we*. I knew it".

The power of that connection, which we as readers quickly come to see as a safe space for our protagonist to think and breathe. I only realised that when she is gone. When I felt what Offred feels when her lifeline has been so inexplicably taken away. And thus the power of the story. Atwood brings us into the world she creates with skill and honesty. The reality

which Offred tells us is marred by her situation. Sometimes she thinks she makes things up. We don't really know what is true and what is not. We don't know who to trust. But we still, as readers, want her to have that lifeline. We want her to be able to breathe. In the recent TV adaptation, Offred when visiting the commander for the first time, equates it with being the girlfriend in a horror movie going to the basement to find her boyfriend. And we feel that too. As she says in the book:

"There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere. Who knows where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person."

So again, as in the descriptions of the birth of the regime and the erosion of rights, experienced with an overwhelming incredulity which renders women unable to act, we see the power of the state over the individual.

Gender-Based Violence

From the outset I haven't specifically referred to GBV although it appears in many guises within this book at both an individual and structural level (Galtung, 1969). From the initial explanation of newspaper's reports of 'other women' harmed by 'other men' we can see the subtle ideology of the new regime creating fear of the 'other' in order to justify the restrictions they then impose.

The act of being a Handmaid is clearly one of state sanctioned rape, and the position of this group of women akin to modern day slavery and trafficking. But the role of the state and its relationship to individuals and individual households raises much broader questions about the role of societies in both sanctioning GBV but also fostering the conditions through which GBV takes place.

The first act of the regime is to remove the rights of individual women. Women can't access their money or bank accounts. They can't work. They can't own property. They become dependent on their male partners and family members. Of course, for many women globally this is an everyday reality not a fiction in a book, but Atwood enacts these changes in a society where women have previously had those rights. She not only takes those rights away but shows how easy it is to do so. This reminds us that any hard won rights are vulnerable to change and that we shouldn't take them for granted. Many working within the GBV field know this only too well with governments seeking to roll back on inheritance rights, reproductive rights, and legislation intended to protect women from male violence.

It is perhaps in the area of reproduction that Atwood raises her most poignant fear. She doesn't rely on a simplistic notion of women as nature to make her point but raises the issue of infertility as a social problem which affects us all. Whilst the Handmaids bear the task to address it, the falling decline in the birth-rate is a problem she poses and leaves us to ponder.

Certainly, whilst the individual women in the story can gain power through pregnancy, the women of Gilead, despite holding such a sparse and valuable resource do not hold the equivalent power. Again, as others have noted, this is something which for many women is a reality. Whether selling surrogacy or through sexual exploitation, the predicament of women in this novel do not appear far-fetched or fanciful. It is perhaps these realities which make the Handmaid's Tale such a powerful novel and one which resonates with women's fear of their position in societies around the world.

Conclusion

The novel ends with a postscript which represents the book we have just read as an artefact being analysed by historians of the future. Alongside an interpretation of what we already know, we are given the wider historical context. That escape is possible and Offred may well have escaped Gilead. We see the acts of the regime described by the academics in an objective way, but it is the story of Offred which we use to make sense of it. And therein lies the final message of the book and Atwood's genius. Our stories matter. Our history matters. The relationships which we have between us matters. And given the recent political events in 2016, maybe those things matter more now than they did before. Atwood is able to predict a future in her novel by looking to the past. For feminists now, whose advancements for women and equality feel under threat, it is imperative that we learn from each other, in different regimes, and that we keep hold of the lessons from the past.

Perhaps my favourite quote from the book comes from Offred when trying to make sense of what has happened to her. This quote more than any other in the book tries to think about power and gender and what it is that might make our experiences different.

"But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing".

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